

What is a Survey

By Fritz Scheuren



Photo by United Press International, Inc.

Harry Truman displays a copy of the Chicago Daily Tribune newspaper that erroneously reported the election of Thomas Dewey in 1948. Truman's narrow victory embarrassed pollsters, members of his own party, and the press who had predicted a Dewey landslide.

Chapter 1

What Is a Survey¹

It has been said the United States is no longer an "industrial society" but an "information society." That is, our major problems and tasks no longer mainly center on the production of the goods and services necessary for survival and comfort.

Our "society," thus, requires a prompt and accurate flow of information on preferences, needs, and behavior. It is in response to this critical need for information on the part of the government, business, and social institutions that so much reliance is placed on surveys.

Then, What Is a Survey

Today the word "survey" is used most often to describe a method of gathering information from a sample of individuals.

¹ The chapter originally was published by the American Statistical Association (ASA) as the first of ten pamphlets. The material included in this Chapter has been updated by Fritz Scheuren from the original 1980 *What Is a Survey* publication prepared for the ASA, by Robert Ferber, Paul Sheatsley, Anthony Turner, and Joseph Waksberg. As with the other material in this booklet, the contents have been subjected to a professional peer-review process and examined for accuracy and readability by members of the survey community.

This "sample" is usually just a fraction of the population being studied.

For example, a sample of voters is questioned in advance of an election to determine how the public perceives the candidates and the issues ... a manufacturer does a survey of the potential market before introducing a new product ... a government entity commissions a survey to gather the factual information it needs to evaluate existing legislation or to draft proposed new legislation.

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Not only do surveys have a wide variety of purposes, they also can be conducted in many ways—including over the telephone, by mail, or in person. Nonetheless, all surveys do have certain characteristics in common.

Unlike a census, where all members of the population are studied, surveys gather information from only a portion of a population of interest—the size of the sample depending on the purpose of the study.

In a bona fide survey, the sample is not selected haphazardly or only from persons who volunteer to participate. It is scientifically chosen so that each person in the population will have a measurable chance of selection. This way, the results can be reliably projected from the sample to the larger population.

Information is collected by means of standardized procedures so that every individual is asked the same questions in more or less the same way. The survey's intent is not to describe the

particular individuals who, by chance, are part of the sample but to obtain a composite profile of the population.

The industry standard for all reputable survey organizations is that individual respondents should never be identified in reporting survey findings. All of the survey's results should be presented in completely anonymous summaries, such as statistical tables and charts.

How Large Must The Sample Size Be

The sample size required for a survey partly depends on the statistical quality needed for survey findings; this, in turn, relates to how the results will be used.

Even so, there is no simple rule for sample size that can be used for all surveys. Much depends on the professional and financial resources available. Analysts, though, often find that a moderate sample size is sufficient statistically and operationally. For example, the well-known national polls frequently use samples of about 1,000 persons to get reasonable information about national attitudes and opinions.

When it is realized that a properly selected sample of only 1,000 individuals can reflect various characteristics of the total population, it is easy to appreciate the value of using surveys to make informed decisions in a complex society such as ours. Surveys provide a speedy and economical means of determining facts about our economy and about people's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and behaviors.

Who Conducts Surveys

We all know about the public opinion surveys or "polls" that are reported by the press and broadcast media. For example, the Gallup Poll and the Harris Survey issue reports periodically describing national public opinion on a wide range of current issues. State polls and metropolitan area polls, often supported by a local newspaper or TV station, are reported regularly in many localities. The major broadcasting networks and national news magazines also conduct polls and report their findings.

The great majority of surveys, though, are not public opinion polls. Most are directed to a specific administrative, commercial, or scientific purpose. The wide variety of issues with which surveys deal is illustrated by the following listing of actual uses

- Major TV networks rely on surveys to tell them how many and what types of people are watching their programs
- Statistics Canada conducts continuing panel surveys of children (and their families) to study educational and other needs
- Auto manufacturers use surveys to find out how satisfied people are with their cars
- The U.S. Bureau of the Census conducts a survey each month to obtain information on employment and unemployment in the nation
- The U.S. Agency for Health Care Policy and Research sponsors a periodic survey to

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